

Career Path

The finest thing by Charles Mak



Matthew Chan, wine advisor
Langham Hotel Hong Kong
Photo: Nolly Leung

Earlier in April, Matthew Chan embarked on an "intoxicating" journey to Auckland and Central Otago in New Zealand where he gained invaluable viticultural experience.

"It was a wonderfully rewarding trip," says Mr Chan, wine advisor, Langham Hotel Hong Kong. "That particular trip was actually the second time the hotel has arranged for me to go on overseas training. It was a real privilege."

In addition to enjoying the opportunity to work part-time at Langham Hotel Auckland's restaurant-of-the-year Partingtons, Mr Chan also met the restaurant's sommelier who set time aside to visit vineyards with Mr Chan all over the country. "We lodged in a winemaker's home and experienced the entire wine making process, which was fun," he recalls.

Fruitful career

Mr Chan started his career 15 years ago. "I took part in a two-year F&B (food and beverage) trainee programme with Hilton Hotel. Working for an internationally reputable hotel helped me build a solid foundation in a wide range of areas such as customer service, F&B service techniques, restaurant and kitchen operations, as well as culinary art and wine appreciation," he says.

Upon completion of the programme, he became a member of the Hilton grillroom's service team. Some five years later, as his interest in wine flourished, he made his latest career move to Langham Hotel Hong Kong. "A sommelier champion at the hotel taught us wine appreciation twice weekly during traditionally quieter afternoon periods and my interest in fine wine grew tremendously," he says. "That's when I started the Wine & Spirits Education Trust Certificate programmes."

Today, he is grateful for the opportunity to turn a hobby into a rewarding career. "Three years ago my supervisor suggested I took charge of the hotel's wine cellar," he says. Since then he has studied other wine programmes such as the Sopexa French Wine & Spirits Advanced Certificate and has undergone related training including courses in Moselle, Germany last year and the aforementioned Auckland, New Zealand earlier this year.

"Exchange of ideas really helps me keep ahead of the game"

A touch of class

Wine appreciation remains esoteric for some. However, Mr Chan emphasises it is not an expensive hobby intended only for an exclusive group of people. "I'd encourage people to try a variety of wines from different parts of the world," he says, noting that wine knowledge not only connects him with customers but also people from all walks of life including professional counterparts, winemakers and international suppliers.

He points out that there are quite a number of qualified sommeliers in Hong Kong, working in hotels, fine restaurants and even upmarket Chinese restaurants. "Wine is now a popular choice for parties and banquets," he says. "More people have developed a taste for it and as a result, have decided to enter the

profession."

A typical day for Mr Chan begins with stock taking and checking wine orders. Planning and managing events such as wine dinners, wine tasting and staff training all form part of his daily agenda.

Keeping in close contact with wine suppliers is an essential part of his work. Invitations to wine tasting events abound and when Mr Chan discovers a marketable wine, he often includes it on the hotel's master wine list or offers it as the next promotional item.

In the evening Mr Chan meets his customers at the hotel's restaurants and advises them on wine according to their menu choices. To complement dishes and give customers the opportunity to try a more exclusive vintage, Mr Chan will occasionally open a wine like Chateau Lafitte. "Lots of local customers want to try new wines and it is our job to create opportunities for them," he says.

In his experience, even a brief chat with customers can be educational. "Customers help us learn more about demand," Mr Chan says. "Marketing a wine is no easy task. Such exchange of ideas really helps me keep ahead of the game."

Although sommeliers need tableside experience and exposure to become successful, they must also be equipped with sophisticated culinary knowledge and skills alongside effective communication techniques. "Serving a bottle of wine means more than pouring out liquid into a glass. It's about the entire dining experience for your customers," Mr Chan stresses.

China Opportunities



As people in Hong Kong continue to take their businesses to the mainland, the wine-drinking population is growing rapidly. "People in mainland China tend to drink a lot of expensive wine," Mr Chan notes. Opportunities are everywhere for people wanting to enter the growing market. However, differences in social behaviour must be respected and appreciated. "Understanding the culture is as important as understanding wine," he cautions.

Career Path

There are no specific career paths to follow, Mr Chan notes. However, thirsty aspirants must learn all the basics and obtain the necessary qualifications such as the internationally recognised Wine & Spirits Education Trust Certificates and Sopexa French Wine & Spirits Certificates. Several local institutions and associations offer entry level certificates which include courses on wine assessment and services, wine management and F&B management to meet the vocational needs in Hong Kong's specific market.

Taken from *Career Times* 20 October 2007, p. C8

Your comments are welcome at editor@careertimes.com.hk